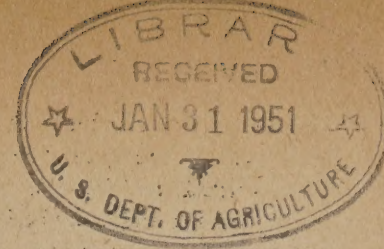


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PUBLIC POLICY EDUCATION IN EXTENSION

by Art Mauch*

The people in the United States think they are the best educated in the world. Yet millions of our people sincerely believe that inflation is painless to everyone - that we can raise our level of living by sending our goods to foreign lands while refusing to accept their goods in exchange. They believe that all our farmers are helpless individuals who must be supported by the Government - that the middleman gets all the profits - that the speculator sets the price - that overproduction causes a depression - that the value of a dollar never changes - that a corporation tax is not paid by individuals - that you can raise wages without raising prices.

It is strange but true that the same folks who urge the Government to get out of business, at the same time, ask the Government to buy some of their goods to maintain high prices. They are willing to give their lives because they believe in free enterprise - but urge their congressmen to put a tariff on goods which compete with theirs. (These tariffs are not confined to goods between countries, but between States as well.) They curse the Government for increasing the Federal debt and creating inflation - but vote for the man that promises lower taxes, higher wages, higher prices, and higher pensions.

These are controversial issues. It was not so long ago that when an extension worker discussed these issues he was declared out-of-bounds - and if he was a county agent he risked being relieved of his job. Times have changed! The people no longer threaten county agents with dire consequences for discussing public problems - more likely the reverse is true. Witness an editorial from the Hardin (Iowa) County Times on "Selecting a County Agent" which was published in Farm Policy Forum. I quote:

"... the new county extension director coming to Hardin County finds himself dealing with many farmers almost as well trained technically as he is. Furthermore he finds that their primary interest is, for the most part, in developing better social and political tools with which to solve problems in agriculture in a highly organized and highly complex world society. They are no longer satisfied with having their adult education programs built around the latest bulletins on blights, Bang's disease, or how to cobble a dressing table out of a peach crate. It is so much easier and safer to go stolidly down the well-known furrow of more and more test tube research and avoid those controversial political and social problems that are the real heart of present day farm problems. Attacking these problems takes courage, but without that courage the extension education program will interest fewer and fewer farmers than it should. The place of the college and its field staff will be taken by other less well trained but more practical minded groups."

And it might well have been added that most of these "practical minded" groups would have a program of their own to sell through this "educational" process.

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We should be reminded also of one of the "bench marks" in the history of education evidenced by the courageous report in 1944 of the Committee on Post-War Agricultural Policy of the Association of Land Grant Colleges and Universities. The report dealt boldly with a number of policy problems including adjustments in agricultural production, agricultural prices, tenure, conservation, rural living and social facilities, and the role of farm people in policy making. In 1945 the committee spelled out very specifically challenges to resident instruction, experiment stations, and Extension Service. Among the suggestions were

1. That time of extension workers, especially county workers and agents be so adjusted that agents would have more time for problems in the field of public policy.
2. That in the training and selection of personnel, more weight be given to competence in social studies. It was also suggested that Extension Service training in these fields be provided and that leave of absence for graduate study be considered.
3. That an organized program of community discussion meetings for both adults and young people be initiated.
4. That a person be given responsibility for assembling, digesting and disseminating to the extension staff new material and information concerning public policy as related to agriculture.
5. That administrative protection and financial support for county extension be such that an expanded program in this field would be possible.

Lest we forget, let me emphasize that education in public policy must not overlook the importance of production. Productivity, indeed, is the key to plenty. "Two blades of grass where one grew before" is still a good slogan. Let us recognize, however, that the physical sciences have progressed far more rapidly than the social sciences. The gap must be closed - not by losing ground in production education, but by gaining ground in public policy education.

Scope and Objectives

I am sure that it is no longer a question of whether we will deal with public problems affecting agriculture, but rather how we will deal with them. But before this can be determined it is well to know what is involved in public policy education. Public problems are those which cannot be solved by individual action. The group action agreed upon becomes the "policy." Government action (local, State, or Federal) is often, but not necessarily, involved.

At a conference of a small group of State and Federal extension workers in Washington, D. C., in 1949, four objectives for public policy education were outlined as follows:

To develop in individuals.

1. An active interest in public policy problems.
2. An understanding of the issues and the principles involved.

3. The ability to make judgments on public policy issues on the basis of a critical examination of the evidence and logical thinking.
4. The desire and ability to participate effectively in the solution of these problems.

Some of the guiding principles suggested were:

1. Controversial issues will often be involved. Our task is not to suggest the solution of such issues but to present all of the circumstances to be taken into consideration in reaching decisions thereon.
2. It should be recognized that the discussion of public policy issues involves not only scientific facts and principles but ethical choices as well.
3. Work in this field should be recognized as a responsibility of the institution as a whole. Effective accomplishment will involve the assignment of definite personnel by the Extension Service.
4. Plans for carrying out this work should be organized in a way to reach all groups affected by public policy programs.
5. Presentation of the problems involved should strive for objectivity and avoid indoctrination.
6. The present and future consequences of programs and problems should be analyzed to set forth the issues in clear meaningful terms.
7. Special emphasis in this field of work should be given to the selection of significant problems and policies and to the timing of the educational work pertaining to these problems and policies.

The immediate reaction of most extension workers is that they are not qualified to operate within the scope of these objectives and principles. To be sure, someone at the State level must have a broad background of training in the social sciences and he must call upon the services of many specialists - the sociologist, the political scientist, the economist, and perhaps even the lawyer and the doctor. However, with the proper written materials, visual aids and other educational devices, an extension specialist or county agent can make a real contribution in public policy education provided he meets four important qualifications: (1) Experience in working with people, (2) the ability to lead and develop discussion and stimulate self-expression, (3) maturity of judgment, and (4) respect for the judgment of others.

Every opportunity should be given extension personnel to become better informed on the principles underlying policy. This includes summer conferences, summer schools, and even time off to do graduate work in the social sciences.

Educational Methods

There is no one "best" way to carry on education in public policy. The lecture method is useful if used by one who himself thoroughly grasps the problems and has

the ability to transmit such grasp to others. Too much dependence can easily be placed on this method, as lecturers can "get by" especially if questions are not asked. It should not be a matter of how much a lecturer can "unload" but rather how much the listeners can take away and use. The lecture method will continue to be used but emphasis must be placed on making it more effective in arousing interest and raising questions. One effective way of doing this is to outline the alternative courses of action that may be taken to attack a problem. By applying sound principles the probable results of each can be pictured. Most of the people will be able to separate the "sheep" from the "goats."

Discussion methods in their various forms are the most effective especially with small groups of 25 or less. Since this method consists of exchanging ideas among individuals, and the raising of questions relating to obscure points, it leads to a clearer understanding, and stimulation of the thinking process. In addition, it encourages taking part in meetings, in expression, and finally general democratic participation. Discussion is not limited to organized meetings but may be used in direct contact with individuals. Discussion, therefore, rates high as an educational method on topics of public policy.

Organized discussion requires leadership. Extension workers will find that it is important to train leaders in the art of discussion as well as to provide material suitable for discussion. In order to reach the masses it will be necessary to provide short, readable pamphlets or fact sheets that can be used in meetings without the presence of a specialist.

Do not overlook the opportunity of using moving pictures, slides, and other visual aids - and don't underestimate the importance of the radio and the press in stimulating interest in public policy problems or for presenting facts in an educational program.

It is especially desirable to bring many viewpoints together in a discussion group. Public policy is often described as the relationship of man and his community. It is important that the farmer, the laborer, the storekeeper and the manufacturer understand each other's problems, and that they learn how dependent they are on each other.

We must recognize that farmers and others do not see the need for discussing international trade, monetary-fiscal policy or social security. They may wish to confine their efforts to local problems such as roads, schools, drainage, or hospitals. The solution to these problems is important. Discussion thereon should be encouraged. It may be necessary by subtle means to arouse interest in the problems that seem far away - problems that perhaps are the most important in determining whether we will continue to be a free people, enjoy a high level of living, and be able to pass on this heritage to our children. This opportunity often arises in connection with outlook, marketing, or farm management meetings. Too often we don't recognize the opening - and miss the boat.

Conclusion

We live in one of the few places in the world where what the people think is really important. We have the democratic way of life - the people make the decisions that determine the broad policies important to their welfare. It is vital that people make wise decisions. The job of the extension worker is twofold. He must develop leadership in the community and he must educate others in the community, at least

to the point where they appreciate the importance of public problems and recognize, choose, and cooperate with wise leadership.

Extension workers must recognize that farm leaders can't get very far ahead of the people they represent. Most politicians want to be statesmen - but they have to get elected. This should be called to the attention of the citizen. It will demonstrate to him that he can translate discussion into action - that he can influence public policy - through his vote, his letters to his congressmen, and through his local "resolutions" that influence the activities of national organizations.

It is not the responsibility of the extension worker to tell people what to think - even if he knew. He might be "dead right" and still be a "dead duck" when those who disagreed took action. Making the headlines is not always the best way to educate people. Public policy is dynamic. If he tells them what to think today it may not apply tomorrow. Not long ago the President of the United States was building forces to stop deflation - a week later he was fighting inflation.

It is the job of an extension worker to teach people how to find the essential facts, how to analyze them, how to evaluate them, and how to draw logical conclusions from the facts. If they are given the right tools and a working knowledge of their use they will be able to make wiser decisions even though the situation is a changing one.

In an educational process it is important to start from where people are in order to build a firm foundation for new educational experiences. Established community groups can serve the purpose and may have some advantages over a new special-purpose organization. However, this involves a danger that the "real" leaders may be overlooked. They are not always the officers of farm organizations. They may be other farmers, the banker, the preacher, the teacher, the editor, or a storekeeper. The county agent usually knows who they are. A series of lessons on principles underlying public policy decisions with the real leaders of the community may pay bigger dividends than trying to reach everyone.

Every opportunity, however, should be sought to meet with the masses to create interest in and appreciation of broad public policy problems - whether it be fifteen minutes at a service club luncheon, thirty minutes at a farm organization annual meeting, or a 2-hour session with an adult education group.

Discuss issues - not personalities. People may be wrong - but don't question their sincerity, or their right to their opinion. They may not know what parity is - but they are sold on its fairness and will defend it with vigor.

Don't forget, either, that extension workers can't get very far ahead of their administrators. The administration must expect that regardless of the amount of training given county workers, specialists and supervisors, there will be some repercussions as they go into the field to deal with controversial subjects. Speakers will be misunderstood and mistakes will be made. We have had this experience both with State and county workers. It is well that this be recognized as we go forward in this field - that mistakes be avoided insofar as possible, but that those charged with administration both in extension and at the higher administrative levels give sufficient support to field workers so that they can make a real contribution in this field.

Whether we want it or not the rest of the world looks to the United States for leadership in world affairs. Although farmers are a minority group they hold an important position in the political balance of power. How farmers think is important. Whether Midwest farmers, to cite only one example, are isolationists rather than cooperators in world affairs will have some influence on the future of the world in respect to war, peace, and the well-being of people the world over as well as those living in their own communities.

Agricultural extension workers have committed themselves to an important and difficult task in the field of public policy education. Never have extension workers faced a greater and more stimulating challenge.